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AUTHOR Bond, Carole L.; Miller, Marilyn J.
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ABSTRACT

Noting that very few reading programs exist in nursing homes, a study surveyed the need for and content of reading services for residents of skilled and intermediate care facilities. The facilities responding to the survey represented 1,800 residents and provided information on their reading activities, available resources, special equipment, individual and group programs, and the participation, problems, and needs related to these programs. The majority of respondents considered reading services to be important to the residents. Approximately one third of the residents were identified as being able to read independently and it was felt that many of the older residents could benefit from oral reading to provide mental stimulation, comfort, and companionship. However, reading activities were generally not promoted by staff, family members, or visitors. Just over half the facilities had libraries, but were lacking in larger print books or special equipment to enhance print size. The responsibility for the delivery of reading services belonged to the activity director with less than a third receiving assistance from other staff members or volunteers. The results suggest that a designated full- or part-time nursing home librarian, managing a core of volunteers specifically for reading aloud to residents, could be an asset to resident care and morale. (HTH)

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A SURVEY OF READING PROGRAMS FOR THE INSTITUTIONALIZED ELDERLY

Carole L Bond, Ph.D.
Director, Reading Center
Memphis State University
Memphis, Tennessee 38152

Marilyn J. Miller, M.S.
Graduate Assistant
Memphis State University
Memphis, Tennessee 38152

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There has been a great deal of discussion in recent years regarding ways to improve the quality of life in long-term care facilities. One such way is to incorporate a reading program into the regular activities for the elderly. A comprehensive reading program can be a valuable resource for enhancing the lives of the institutionalized elderly. As Wolf (1977) so aptly states, "Reading is a means to perpetuate an ongoing communication with life."

Nursing homes have changed from custodial institutions to facilities offering a wide range of proactive, rehabilitation-oriented programs for the purpose of meeting the physical, psychological, and social needs of the residents. While many diverse programs are in use, reading programs, unfortunately, are often overlooked as a tool to enhance socialization. They are unavailable and seldom used as therapeutic activities individually or in groups, yet reading programs can be an excellent solitary or group activity providing intellectual, emotional, and social stimulation.

Nurses, social workers, recreation therapists and other staff members are constantly searching for new and innovative programs and activities to enrich the lives of residents and promote functioning at a maximum level of independence. The continuation of life long interest is one of the primary goals of functional independence. Instead of prescribing what is good for residents based on preconceived notions of what elderly people will enjoy every effort should be made to discover their own interests and information regarding their lifestyles prior to admission. Reading is one type of leisure time pursuit that is valued

strongly by older adults. When the elderly are given a choice of activities they most desire, reading for pleasure ranks as a high interest activity. Counter to the orientation of many recreation therapists, individual and passive activities are most highly preferred by nursing home residents (Lemmon and Pieper, 1980). Yet, structured group activities are highly valued by staff, therefore, creating conflict that exacerbates a common problem identified by nursing personnel - "residents just don't want to join in any of the activities." Residents are pressured to socialize and the resistance continues. However, reading does not promote isolation as one might guess but instead serves to enhance socialization as people who read seek to communicate what they have read.

By providing residents with a variety of books, magazines, newspapers, and other reading materials, the nursing staff open avenues for discussions and the exchange of personal feelings and ideas. When the focus of conversation shifts from physical ailments to a more intellectually stimulating topic of interest recently derived from a story, poem, newspaper or magazine article, residents are able to continue adult roles so important to maintaining a sense of self worth. In addition to providing entertainment, relaxation and opportunities for conversation, reading can help the institutionalized elderly cope with problems associated with nursing home life and strengthen inner resources.

Reading programs can follow a variety of formats. One such format is called bibliotherapy. Research indicates that bibliotherapy can

bring about positive changes in attitudes, the reductions of fears and overall improvement in health status (Schrank and Engels, 1981). With knowledge of the goals and process as involved in bibliotherapy the concept can effectively be adapted to the nursing home setting. Common themes related to institutionalization such as fear, anger, loneliness, depression, and grief can be dealt with in a caring supportive manner through the use of printed materials. This can be accomplished both individually or in small groups. Reading selections can be carefully chosen to facilitate adjustment and promote a positive sense of self. In order to lift purposeful reading out of the context of recreational activity, feelings expressed about the material should be addressed with empathy, respect and honesty.

Reading can also be incorporated into group work with residents. Poetry, current events, book reviews, and bible study are activities that involve reading orally, silently or both. Residents can benefit from intellectual and social stimulation when an emphasis is placed on a variety of small, high-interest group activities rather than the traditional large group programs.

If reading can enhance the lives of nursing home residents in so many ways, why are there so few of these types of programs in existance? Is reading dismissed as invaluable to the institutionalized elderly because of the widely held assumption that aged persons are incapable of intellectual activity, as well as, personal growth and development? Life long education is an interest expressed by many

older people (Butler and Lewis, 1982) yet, nursing home placement often results in a termination of any opportunities for continued learning. The aged can and do learn.

Problems with incorporating reading programs and activities in nursing homes were identified by the respondents to a recent survey sponsored by the Memphis State University Reading Center.

The survey was administered to investigate, the need for and content of, reading services provided for residents of skilled and intermediate care facilities. Information was gathered on resident's reading activities, available resources, special equipment, individual and group programs, and the participation, problems, and needs related to these programs.

Forty-eight percent of the questionnaires were returned representing a total of 1800 residents. The majority of respondents considered reading services t. be important to the residents. Approximately one third of these residents were identified as being able to read independently and it was felt that many of the older residents could benefit from oral reading to provide mental stimulation, comfort and companionship. However, reading activities were generally not promoted by staff, family members, or visitors. Possible obstacles to promoting reading activities, as identified by the survey were as follows.

Of the total number of facilities responding, just over half had a library within the facility. Those which did have libraries were lacking in larger print books or special equipment to enhance print

size. Although talking books and special radios for the visually impaired were generally available in the nursing home, only 12% of the residents have used the equipment. Residents rarely had larger print books, magnifying lenses, or Talking Books in their rooms for their own personal use. Only three of the homes received visits by the public library and then it was only once every one to three months.

It was also found that the responsibility for the delivery of reading services belonged to the activity director with less than a third receiving assistance from other staff members or volunteers.

Just over one third of the activity directors reported that oral reading was sometimes included in activity groups such as current events, bible study, reality orientation, reminiscing, or remotivation therapy. Three homes reported offering some form of bibliotherapy according to a broad definition that included using selected reading materials to bring about positive psychological or social changes in specific individuals according to their identified needs. Only one of the homes offered a group specifically related to reading, a bi-monthly poetry group.

Barriers to implementing reading programs can be overcome when nursing and other staff members are motivated to make changes. Some suggestions for making reading activities possible are as follows. A designated part-time or full-time nursing home librarian could be a valuable member of the rehabilitation team. Responsibilities could include the delivery of reading programs and maintenance of a library for

residents and staff. The librarian could manage a core of volunteers specifically recruited for the purpose of reading aloud to bedridden or handicapped residents in need of mental stimulation, comfort and companionship. Book reviews, and small special interest groups such as poetry, current events, life review and reminiscing programs could be conducted by the librarian. She could act as a liaison representative to outside agencies by promoting community involvement with public libraries, the Lions Club, optomotrists, and various resource services which sponsor book exchanges and donations. She could maintain special equipment for the visually impaired and still have the time to devote to promoting its use. She could maintain interest inventories and stimulate residents to participate in reading according to their own abilities. Obviously, a comprehensive reading program for nursing home residents involves a great deal more than placing a few copies of what are usually outdated magazines or large print Reader's Digest around lobby areas and expecting residents to read in an environment that is generally crowded, noisy and prone to many interruptions.

The quality of life in care facilities is improving but continues to be criticized often for justifiable reasons. Specialized services such as those delivered by a staff librarian are yet to be the norm. We are doing a great disservice to the elderly by not promoting reading as a therapeutic, pleasurable educational component of the total approach to nursing home care.

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